

At the philosophy of war memorials:
the public healing process after death

War memorials
{ Public Celebrations } and Private Grieving:

The Public Healing Process after Death

The role of the philosopher in assessing the practice of the construction of war memorials seems to entail asking a variety of questions which spring naturally from centuries of reflection on the meaning of death. Socrates taught that philosophy itself was the "practice of death and dying"¹ While he meant that a philosopher ought to spend his or her life practicing the separation of soul from body, it is possible to give his remarks a wider interpretation. Simply put, it would seem that a philosopher has an obligation to think about death and to try to place it in the broader context of the search for the meaning of life.

In the specific context of this paper I will examine the tradition of the construction of war memorials in an effort to uncover how this practice may relate to a search for the meaning of life by the survivors. The study will be divided into the following three sections: I. The Subjective Grieving Process and Monuments to the Dead; II. The Objective History of Monuments for the Dead; and III. Possible Roles of Military Monuments in the Grieving Process.

I.

The Subjective Grieving Process
and Monuments for the Dead

Thanks to the remarkable advances of modern psychology the "grieving

¹Plato, Phaedo 67^e.

process" in human beings has recently received very serious study. Certainly before this time, individuals, such as artists or "the wise", had an intuitive grasp of the ways in which persons respond to significant loss in their lives. However, since the pathbreaking work of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross a significant number of comparisons of grief responses have been made to develop some generalizations which are useful to the present subject under consideration.

Dr. Kubler-Ross, through extensive interviews with people dying of terminal disease, discovered five general categories of responses which can be described as follows: first stage, denial and isolation; second stage, anger; third stage, bargaining; fourth stage, depression; and fifth stage, acceptance.² While Kubler-Ross did not want to make these categories into a rigid chronological hierarchy, she nonetheless observed that people who grieve tend to respond in the stages outlined above.

What then can we conclude from these observations about the responses of people who lose a relative or friend in war? Dr. Kubler-Ross makes the following analogy: "Family members undergo different stages of adjustment similar to the ones described for our patients."³ At first glance, then, it would seem that the decision to construct a monument to the dead person may have some relation to the stages of grief. That is, if a family member who grieves for a person killed in war follows the same general

²Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969): 38, 50, 82 and 112.

³Ibid., p. 168.

patterns of grief that a person undergoes who is dying of a terminal disease, then it would be valuable to study how individual tombstones or collective monuments might play a role in the healing process after death.

Another important study by the British psychiatrist Collin Murray Parkes traces the process of bereavement in a selected group of widows in London. Dr. Parkes uncovered a series of adjustments to the grieving process which he described in the following way: first stage, numbness and alarm; second stage, pining, searching, with upsurges of anger; third stage, depression with mitigation and/or avoidance; and fourth stage, recovery.⁴ Parkes also later discovered that his conclusions were corroborated by a Harvard study of American women.⁵ This research, then, suggests that the bereaved follow similar stages of adjustment to death as does the patient with a terminal disease.

It is interesting to note that Dr. Parkes discovered that most widows spend a great deal of time pining and searching for their husbands. Recognizing this to be a common characteristic of animal reaction to loss, he observed that: "Most widows liked to visit their husband's grave and several spoke of the almost uncanny attraction that drew them to the cemetery. They would think of him as being located in or around the grave."⁶ An obvious question which springs from this observation is whether or not a monument may serve a similar purpose of "finding" the lost person even though he may not be buried directly under it.

⁴ Collin Murray Parkes, Bereavement (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972): p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶ Ibid., p. 70.

Perhaps the most fruitful aspects of Dr. Parkes' research for the purpose of this study is his differentiation of typical from atypical grief. As a psychiatrist, he sought to discover why some persons entered what might be called "chronic grief" instead of passing through the phases of the grieving process to recovery or acceptance. There appear to be two alternative ways of being trapped in chronic grief: "one was a tendency for grief to be prolonged, the other was a tendency for the reaction to bereavement to be delayed."⁷ Once again it is interesting to consider what role the construction of a monument or the lack of construction of a monument in memory of a lost person could relate to different kinds of bereavement.

Dr. Parkes selected out a variety of factors as being helpful for anticipating the nature of the resolution of the grieving process. Some of these factors are listed below:⁸

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|---------------------|---|
| Antecedent factors: | Previous experience of loss |
| | Relationship with the deceased |
| | Mode of death |
| Concurrent factors: | Sex, age, personality |
| | Nationality, religion, cultural factors |
| | influencing the expression of grief. |
| Subsequent factors: | Support or isolation |
| | Secondary stresses |
| | Emergent life opportunities |

⁷Ibid., p. 131.

⁸Ibid., p. 146.

A person who had successfully grieved through previous losses, or whose national and religious traditions allowed for an outward expression of grief, or whose life opportunities were open would have a much better chance of progressing through a normal grief reaction than a person who had not coped well with loss in the past, or who had no way of expressing grief within his or her culture, or whose life appeared blocked by the death. The latter person would be more prone to chronic grief.

At this point it is necessary to ask the question whether the analogy of the grieving process can be developed one step further. We have moved from the grieving of an individual who is dying from a terminal disease to the grieving of a person left by death of someone else. The next step of analogy would be from the grieving of an individual to the grieving of a society or nation. If the processes follow the same patterns, then the above information gleaned from psychiatric research into different grieving responses of widows will be enlightening for thought about the collective grieving process. Even more significant, it will be possible to raise questions about the practice of the construction of war memorials in the light of psychological insights.

There are historical antecedents for the use of analogy from the mentality of the individual to the mentality of a group. Plato thought of his utopian Republic as an "individual soul writ large".⁹ He believed that the state and the soul had exactly the same divisions and the same patterns of interaction. Later Sigmund Freud in the 19th century perceived

⁹Plato, Republic 368c - 369c

civilization as a large organism with the same causes of disease and health as the individual psyche.¹⁰ Therefore, one could say that philosophers have for centuries posed the hypothesis that the individual and society have analogous natures. Since it is possible today to test this hypothesis with the empirical methods of the social sciences, one of the purposes of this paper is simply to point out some of the directions that this research could take.

Before turning away from the subjective history of the relation of the grieving process to monuments, I would like to include one further insight of Dr. Collin Murray Parkes. In observing the role of the memorial visit to the cemetery, he reaching the following conclusions:

The timing of such turning-points are important. They tend to occur at the expiry of a set period of time, for instance at an anniversary. A memorial service of a visit to the cemetery carried out at this time can have the significance of a rite de passage, setting the bereaved free from the dead and allowing him to undertake fresh commitments. 11

If the analogy holds true between the individual and the state, then the ritual of memorial day services may play an important role in the process of being set free from the dead at the same time as it honors the lost victims of war. The monument in the cemetery may serve as the focal point of the rite of passage. It locates the memory of the deceased in a particular place in space and time. It may also locate a particular war in the history of a nation. At this point, it is useful to turn now to the subject of the tradition of the construction of monuments to the dead

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, in Civilization, Society, and Religion, ed. by The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 12 (London, England: Penguin, 1980, p. 257).

¹¹ Parkes, op. cit., p. 206

in western society before reaching any further conclusions.

II

The Objective History of Monuments for the Dead

Contemporary North American culture is an amalgamation of Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Christian influences. It is not surprising to discover, then, that the more specific history of funeral monuments gives evidence of these different historical sources. Therefore, a brief survey of some of the characteristics of these traditions will now be given.

In a recent study, the historian Lionel Rothkrug has pointed out that in ancient Israel two burials, rather than one, was the tradition.¹² When Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were "gathered to his people" their bones, after the decay of the flesh, were taken and placed in an ancestral tomb. This second burial occurred after a period of time which allowed the body to be purified of the flesh. This second burial may be reflected in the contemporary Jewish tradition of waiting nearly a year before the ceremony of "unveiling" of the monument honoring the dead.¹³ In ancient tradition, the tomb which contained the purified bones of the deceased became a sacred place of pilgrimage to which family members would return again and again.

¹²Lionel Rothkrug, "The Odour of Sanctity and the Hebrew Origin of Christian Relic Veneration", Historical Reflections, Vol. 8, Summer 1981, pp. 91-101.

¹³Maurice Lanin, The Jewish Way of Death and Mourning (New York: Jonathan David Publisher, 1969), pp. 190-194.

Later in Jewish history, after the exile of 586 BC, the bones of the deceased were gathered and given a collective burial in which there was no differentiation of individual tombs or graves. By the time of the prophet Ezekial the bones were gathered outside Jerusalem to wait for the coming of the Messiah. Rothkrug expresses this change as follows:

Ezekial's vision of a valley filled with the dry bones of all Israel contrasts sharply with the pre-exilic practice of gathering the remains of the elites to their ancestral tombs. By resuscitating the bones of past generations and returning them to Israel, Ezekial helped in the long run to nationalize the secondary burial among the Jews of the Diaspora. ¹⁴

Therefore, it is within the Hebrew tradition that a practice of burying a people collectively emerged. The precedence of the community over the individual was reflected in these burial practices. After the exile, Jews making pilgrimages to Jerusalem would often stop at the burial grounds to remember the dead and to forge a deeper bond with their collective identity.

In another article, Rothkrug compares the Hebrew preference for collective burial with the tradition of importance given to the individual within Greek culture. Rothkrug observes: "Ancient Greece abounded with hero graves."¹⁵ The tomb of the hero became a place of public gathering for the polis in which he was buried. In fact, every town sought to have a hero buried in its soil because the Greeks believed that the hero's remains would bring good fortune to people living there.

¹⁴ Rothkrug, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁵ Lionel Rothkrug, "The Cult Relics of Antiquity", European Archaic Spirituality, ed. Charles Long (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, forthcoming), p. 5 of manuscript.

From the perspective of the consideration of grief it is important to note that for the Greeks it was a great honor to die in battle. Aristotle suggests that death in battle at the height of one's physical powers is the ^{noblest} ~~best possible~~ way to die.¹⁶ The cult of the hero and particularly the cult of the military hero in Greece was, above all, the cult of the individual. By idealizing the dead, the Greeks transformed their grief. Then by believing further that the deceased hero had power to protect the people where he was buried, the surviving family members and friends remained in a continued relationship with the dead person. However, it was the individual rather than the collective which had the power, and when the Greeks moved from the location of the grave, they did not continue to return to visit the remains.

The Roman tradition followed that of the Greeks rather than that of the Hebrews. Phillipe Aries in his classic work Western Attitudes Towards Death observes: "In ancient Rome, everyone, even the slaves, has a burial place, a loculus, and . . . this place was marked by an inscription."¹⁷ The importance given to the individual inscription by Roman tradition is then in stark contrast to the lack of individuation found in Hebrew collective burial. Following this latter tradition, early Christians wanted to be buried with martyrs in a collective grave. They were usually buried in a church yard

¹⁶ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1115^a 26 - 32

¹⁷ Phillipe Aries, Western Attitudes Towards Death, trans. Patricia M. Ronum (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 47.

without individual grave markers. These Christian practices of collective burial had, by the fifth century, erased the Roman practice of marking individual graves.

Then in the late middle ages a dramatic shift occurred and the individual grave once again began to emerge. Aries states: "Beginning with the thirteenth century -- and perhaps slightly earlier -- we again find the funeral inscriptions which had all but disappeared during the previous eight or nine hundred years."¹⁸ The Renaissance of Greek and Roman thought therefore affected even the burial practices of the western world.

Along with the return of a personal inscription on individual tombs, artists began to create effigies. At first the effigy did not necessarily bear any resemblance to the person who had died. For example, T.S. Boase in a book entitled Death in the Middle Ages notes that: "The tomb of Bernardo Viconti of Milan (died 1385) represents a new and unusual type, a sarcophagus surmounted by an equestrian statue."¹⁹ Aries then observes that in the fourteenth century tombs reveal a turn to more and more realism, and the death mask began to be used.

At the same time another tradition began to emerge in which a family would attach a plaque of 30-40 centimeters to a church wall to commemorate the dead. From the 16th to the 18th centuries these plaques were very

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ T.S.R. Boase, Death in the Middle Ages (London: Thames and Hudson Limited, 1972), p. 92.

common. Aries observes: "The important element was the calling to mind of the deceased's identity, and not the remembrance of the exact place where the body had been placed."²⁰ The new age of the individual had just dawned, and these traditions confirm the fact that the personality of the individual had assumed more importance than the bodily remains.

In the eighteenth century another shift in mentality occurred in the west. As Aries describes it: "A new concept of society was born at the end of the eighteenth century . . . an intellectualized form of nationalism."²¹ Within this climate of thinking, a person who was not religious would nonetheless make frequent visits to the tomb or plaque out of a desire to honor relatives or important persons of the state.

By the nineteenth century, villages and towns began to create cemeteries away from the church and yet clearly within visiting range of their daily activities. Stanley French, in a study of the history of the rural cemetery movement, notes that the first rural garden cemeteries were created in Paris in 1804, in Glasgow in 1833, in London in 1840, and in Rochester, New York in 1836. Stanley claims:

In the early years of the rural cemetery movement the most important stylistic consideration concerning monuments was decreed by national self-consciousness. Grave stones and other monuments were supposed to be commensurate with the ideals of a republic.

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²⁰ Aries, op. cit., p. 50.

²¹ Ibid., p. 73.

²² Stanley French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution", Death in America, ed. David Stannard (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), p. 81.

It is interesting to note that the sculpture on the tombs also indicated the different historical origins of North American culture. French notes that from the revolutionary era to 1840 the dominant type of monument was Greek, i.e. a sculptured marble block surmounted by an urn; while from 1840 to the end of the civil war period a resurgence of Egyptian art occurred with the choice of the winged globe, obelisk, sphinx, etc. He concluded: "A new awareness of history provided by the artistic memorials of a rural cemetery would reinvigorate the sense of patriotism."²³

Aries confirms Stanley's hypotheses about American culture with his own observations about France:

Today the cult of the dead is one of the forms or expressions of patriotism. Thus in France the anniversary of the victorious conclusion of World War I is considered the feast day of dead soldiers. It is celebrated at the Monument to the Dead, to be found in every French village, no matter how small. Without a monument to the dead the visiting could not be celebrated.

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Aries, however, believes that it is in North America that the monument for the memorial of the dead developed further patriotic expression. "It is in America, in Washington D.C., even more than in the Pantheon of Paris, that we find the first major manifestations of the funeral cult of the hero."²⁵ The monuments to Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Arlington Cemetery and other war memorials turn the city of Washington D.C. into a focus of pilgrimages to honor the heroic dead.

²³ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

²⁴ Aries, op. cit., p. 75.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

Before concluding this section on the objective history of monuments for the dead, some consideration should be given to the specific history of monuments to the military dead. The plight of Antigone in the Oedipus Trilogy indicates that the Greeks believed that lack of burial of the military dead, even when they were considered to be traitors to the state, was a sin against the gods. By burying her brother, Antigone accepted the consequence of her fate, death at the hand of the state.²⁶ In medieval Christianity, "the corpses of great men dying from their homes were sometimes dismembered, the bones cleaned by boiling, and the latter brought back to the native soil while the other remains were buried at the place of death."²⁷ The average soldier, however, was often left where he died to decompose and become part of the earth.

The Union forces in the American Civil War were the first to decide to form battlefield cemeteries with individualized markers for the soldier's graves.²⁸ Then the French and Germans followed this procedure in the Franco-Prussian War. In Canada it was not until the First World War that a concerted effort was made to identify the bodies of the dead and to arrange their graves with individualized markers. The problem of what to do with unidentifiable bodies or the missing dead posed a problem:

²⁶ Sophocles, Antigone, in The Theban Plays (Middexer, Penguin, 1962) p. 127.

²⁷ Boase, op. cit., p. 113.

²⁸ Herbert Fairlie Wood and John Sweetenham, Silent Witnesses for the Canadian War Museum, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Ontario (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), p. 5.

The policy as to what should be done with regard to the commemoration of the half million who were missing evolved slowly. . . . The answer was at last found in the great memorials that were erected on the principle battle fields of the war. These, it was decided would bear the names of the missing dead. ²⁹

In this way the individual and the collective merged within a single monument. At the same time, however, the individual and the collective were kept distinct. The individual was represented by the use of a name, and the collective by the particular structure of the monument chosen for the site. It would seem that a careful study of the different kinds of war memorials would be able to generate some insight into the ways in which a society viewed the death of those lost in battle. For example, was the monument primarily religious, i.e. in the form of a cross? Or was it romantic, i.e. in the form of a young man raising a flag? Was it starkly political, i.e. with dominant reference to the nation? Or did it attempt to merge different conceptual realities?

The Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917 was established by the government of Canada for the first time. Its responsibility was to become actively involved in the burial and commemoration of the military dead. Large monuments were constructed on the major battle fields of Europe. One example of their work was the war memorial constructed at Vimy Ridge. Begun in 1925 this monument took eleven years to finish.³⁰ It is in the form of two mammoth gates which symbolize the dimension of the sacrifice of the soldiers. Most Canadian monuments and military grave markers incorporate

²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

the Christian cross. However, the political dimension of the memorial is also often present in the form of a maple leaf, the symbol which has recently been incorporated into the Canadian flag.

The Commission also built several monuments in honor of the military dead in Canada itself:

In at least twenty cemeteries across Canada the Cross of Sacrifice has been erected, and, in Brookside Cemetery, Winnipeg, there is a Stone of Remembrance. This is the only one in Canada and the site was deliberately chosen; Winnipeg is considered the geographical center of Canada, the heart of the nation. ³¹

The fact that this Stone of Remembrance was erected in Canada in 1960 offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the particular significance of this act to the psychology of a nation. This opportunity leads us to the third and final section of this paper.

III

Possible Roles of Military Monuments

in the Grieving Process

Earlier in this paper it was suggested that nations or states may follow similar stages in grieving as does an individual. It has also been pointed out that the history of the construction of monuments has involved a political as well as a psychological dimension. It must be further recognized that there is also an economic component to the construction of monuments. Businesses stand to make money if they can sell more monuments.

³¹ Ibid., p. 204.

Therefore, it is important to proceed with some caution before assessing the timing of the construction of a monument simply in terms of the psychological process of grieving. The actual moment of construction may be determined by a complex of several factors, rather than simply one.

At the same time, however, in certain cases it may be that the psychological factor is the dominant one in reaching a decision about the above mentioned Stone of Remembrance in Winnipeg in the year 1960 at the geographical heart of the country; it is worthwhile to bear in mind that Canada was going through a crisis of identity at the time. The confederation has always been a fragile union of French and English components as well as of western and eastern interests. It therefore is possible to understand the need for a monument to center the grieving process, for a country that might die, some place in the "heart of the country". In this way a new meaning in life can be reinforced from the roots of the historical past. The Stone of Remembrance serves as the focal point in which the military dead become the source of the new meaning for the living. The soldiers did not sacrifice their lives in vain because out of their deaths a country can become strengthened in its national identity. Or inversely, a country ought not to give up and die because so much has been sacrificed to keep it alive. In this sense, the choice of timing for the monument, or a period of new crisis of identity for the nation, and the choice of location for the monument, the geographical heart of Canada, are both significant for the process of the further growth of the country.

It might be interesting to consider a slightly different situation

in the United States. Psychological studies indicate that when the relation to a deceased person is characterized by ambivalence, the grieving process is frequently prolonged or delayed. If we were to compare the time and place of the construction of monuments after the Second World War with those after the Vietnam War some interesting observations might surface. The Vietnam War left the citizens of the United States in a crisis engendered by an ambivalent love-hate response to the war, whereas the Second World War was nearly universally accepted in a positive way. This fact then might reveal itself in two different attitudes towards the construction of monuments after the two wars.

The question that would be interesting to consider in the light of this situation include: Was there a significant difference in time in the construction of monuments to the military dead in the two wars? How long did it take after the beginning of World War II for memorials similar to the Vietnam Memorial to be built? We know that the Vietnam Memorial was cut deep into the earth rather than being mounted on a hill. What about any difference in style? Does the use of dark marble indicate anything about the grieving process after an ambivalent response to a war? What is the difference between monuments from a war that was lost rather than won? Or is ambivalence a result of an unclear solution to the war itself, almost parallel to a situation in which someone is not certain that a missing person has indeed died? Finally, is there any significant difference in the styles of monuments to the two wars?

In order to answer these questions a systematic study ought to be made by military historians of the variety of memorials after World War II

and the Vietnam War. It seems at first glance that psychology may be an important factor in assessing the time, place and nature of the construction of war monuments.

There is a further aspect of war monuments that bears equal importance for this study. This concerns the function of the monument after construction for the individual and collective grieving process. While it may be difficult to uncover objective data to assess the psychological dynamics of grief in the construction process itself, it may be possible to study objectively the process of working through grief after the monument has been completed. At this point a monument can be integrated into the ritualized process of paying tribute to the dead both in the lives of the individual survivors and in the life of the state.

Phillipe Aries states: "The monument is indeed a tomb, an empty one of course, but it perpetuates memory, a momentum."³² By providing a focus for the grieving process, visiting a war memorial may be a considerable help for an individual to achieve a recovery from a loss and to move forward into the future with a renewed meaning in life. In the situation where the loss of the war or the uncertain resolution of the war is part of the dynamics of the memorial, then the opportunity to repeatedly visit the monument may afford the opportunity to the nation to integrate this experience of grief and similarly move forward into a new understanding of the meaning of the mission of the country itself. In these cases, the memorial indeed becomes a momentum for recovery.

³²Aries, op. cit., pp. 74-75.

In the first part of this paper some of the factors which Dr. Collin Murray Parkes isolated as important indicators for the satisfactory resolution of the grieving experience were listed. The mode of death was listed as an antecedent factor. In war, when so many men die of brutal and defacing wounds, or where a person's body is not even identifiable, or finally when the person is missing and simply presumed dead, it is often difficult for a relative or friend to accept the death event in the same way as, for example, when the person dies simply of a disease close to home. The problem is accentuated because the dead person's body can not be seen, so there is often a lingering doubt about whether or not the person really died. In these cases, a monument with a name of the dead person or one which is a focus for thoughts about the deceased can help considerably to end the relentless experience of searching or pining for the dead person. The place for thought about the person is specified in the monument and grief can move forward.

Another factor mentioned by Parkes is the national or cultural expression of grief. Clearly, regular memorial services on an annual basis joined with open accessibility and attractiveness of a military cemetery allows for the continued expression of grief to occur. When the services integrate the loss of the dead person into a purpose common to the nation, the death is able to take on further meaning. The individual is no longer isolated, and the grief is no longer carried alone. Instead the community shares the burden of grief and the community carries the meaning of the loss forward into the building of the values of the nation into the future.

Therefore, as Parkes so aptly stated, the rites of passage of regular

visits to a place which allows a focus on the dead person to recur can facilitate "setting the person free from the dead and allowing him to undertake fresh commitments."³³ This possibility of being able to think about the deceased without the pain is sometimes described as the second burial in which the painful part of the grieving process is laid to rest and the momentum from the resurgent new life is released.

In this way the construction of war monuments and their careful maintenance and use can become an integral part of the process of the development of individuals and of nations by their capacity to catalize integration and individuation. Finally, war monuments then must not be perceived simply as ends in themselves constructed to glorify war, but rather as a means for the furthering of humanity in its search to integrate the painful reality of death and its complementary struggle to find the meaning of life.

Sister Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *PhD*
Department of Philosophy
Concordia University
Montreal

³³ Parkes, op. cit., p. 206.